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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND CONCERNED ABOUT AVIAN INFLUENZA THREAT

REF: A. SECSTATE 153802

[1](#)B. IIR 6 869 0040 05

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires David R. Burnett,
for reasons 1.4(B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: New Zealand is taking very seriously the threat of avian influenza, and an inter-ministerial group meets biweekly to discuss preparations. There are also numerous subgroups of officials who are strategizing on how the country would address the public health, economic, social, and other consequences of an epidemic here. New Zealand is coordinating closely with WHO, Australian officials, and others on flu preparations. Despite this work, an official heavily involved in the planning said that the country's ability to monitor the spread of avian flu elsewhere is limited, especially in those countries not known for accurate reporting. GNZ would welcome U.S. information (including intelligence) about outbreaks anywhere in the world. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On September 1, ADCM discussed New Zealand's avian flu strategy with Marlene Castle, External Assessments Bureau (EAB). EAB is located in the Prime Minister's office and is responsible for monitoring and analyzing world events for the PM and Cabinet officials. Castle is a chemical and biological weapons expert and has been following the avian flu epidemic for the last two years. She is also heavily involved in GNZ's contingency planning should a pandemic strike here, and regularly briefs the Prime Minister on the disease's trajectory. (Comment: Castle showed ADCM a returned copy of her August briefing memo; the PM had underlined several passages and had commented in the margins that the memo's contents had great implications for New Zealand. End Comment.) Castle said that since early this year, it had been more and more apparent to EAB that the avian flu could become a pandemic. An "Interdepartmental Pandemic Planning" group was formed in June and has met every two weeks since then.

[1](#)3. (C) The interdepartmental group is coordinated by the Ministry of Health in close cooperation with the Officials Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC), comprised of senior GNZ officials from the Prime Minister's office and other ministries. EAB Director David Kersey has been seconded to ODESC for this purpose, and currently spends only 10% of his time at EAB. In addition to the overall group, there are a variety of subgroups looking at contingency planning in various sectors should an outbreak strike. These include border controls, education, social implications, etc. The group and its related subgroups include virtually every government department, including the Prime Minister's Office, Police, Fire service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Education Department, Labour Department, Civil Defence, Transport (civil aviation and maritime), Inland Revenue, and the Treasury.

[1](#)4. (C) The groups have been instructed to plan for the worst-case scenario. The education group, for example, is looking at when and how to shut down all schools in New Zealand. Others are looking how to maintain essential services such as telecommunications, information technology, energy, banking, the provision of food, and the continuation of non-flu related medical services.

[1](#)5. (C) There is of course also a group developing a health plan to deal with the outbreak itself. The plan is based on WHO guidelines. Castle said that GNZ officials involved in the plan are in "constant touch" with WHO as well as Australian officials. (One Kiwi health official had just returned from Australia, Castle said.) GNZ also is looking to obtain enough antivirals to treat 20% of the population. They have half of this supply already, Castle said. GNZ officials are also looking with interest at the development of vaccines in the United States and Australia. Given that the vaccines will not be ready for some time, the government is focusing attention on how to stop the disease from entering New Zealand, restricting its spread if it does, and managing the situation if the outbreak spreads. Officials are also considering how to take care of New Zealand officials and defense forces who may be exposed to avian flu overseas.

16. (C) The "external" subgroup is also looking at Pacific Island governments' preparations for a possible pandemic, especially the Cook Islands and Niue, which are self-governing in free association with New Zealand. Officials are also concentrating on Samoa and Tonga, given these island's strong connection with New Zealand.

17. (C) The planning group is developing a public education campaign, including a website that Castle said should be in place soon. Other steps are being considered, including pamphlets and the inclusion of information in phone directories. The aim is to educate without inducing panic. Castle estimated that the Government's planning was about 50% completed so far. The aim is to have all planning completed by late October or early November.

18. (C) Castle expressed concern that the reporting of disease incidence by Russia, China, Hong Kong, and countries in SE Asia is not accurate. She said GNZ would appreciate any information the United States could provide -- open source or otherwise -- about outbreaks in these and other countries. Castle said she has already discussed this and other avian flu-related issues with State Department officials, and has greatly appreciated this exchange. She said her monthly reports to the Prime Minister are already being provided to U.S. analysts through separate channels.

Contact Information

19. (C) New Zealand's key senior contact on Avian Flu issues is External Assessment Bureau (EAB) Director David Kersey. The best working level contact is EAB analyst Marlene Castle. Although Kersey and Castle are both with the External Assessments Bureau, Kersey is working on avian flu issues in the Prime Minister's Department for most of the time. he can, however, still be reached via EAB. Embosffs are in regular contact with both Kersey and Castle.

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